

Notes on the possible breeding of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii*

Uffe Gjøl Sørensen, Jorgen Bech, Kaj Halberg, Erling Krabbe

One of many exciting experiences during a visit to Ethiopia in January–February 1996 was obtaining the first potential information on the breeding habits of the extremely range-restricted Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii*. This came about through a chance meeting with local people while observing this rare bird. Through their assistance we were able to examine what was probably the first egg ever known to science.

On 29 January the morning was spent in a dried-out but luxuriously vegetated river-bed leading to the Genale River in Sidamo Province in southern Ethiopia (5°41'N, 39°32'E; altitude 1085 ± 97m). The site (subsequently called the Genale site) is a couple of kilometres south of the bridge over the Genale River on the road between Dello Mena and Negele, approximately 40 km due north of the town of Negele. Birdlife in the area is very rich, but late in the morning the adventures reached their climax as a single adult Prince Ruspoli's Turaco was located in a stand of tall fig trees (*Ficus* sp). At first the bird was actively feeding on figs, but it soon moved to a nearby fig-tree where for the next half hour or so it perched, fully exposed, on a branch just below the main canopy.

In the telescope this gave excellent views of the brilliant bird with its attractive palette of colours on the head: a prominent bleached out toupee with a slight reddish hue at the base, bordered by a narrow crimson patch on the nape. On the forehead a very delicate tinge of blue graded into the otherwise dark green face, a fresh green cheek, an intensely red bill and, most of all, a narrow crimson eyering lined above by an almost fluorescent crimson wattled eyelid — nicely lobed like an exaggerated eyelash and giving the bird a remarkable touch of the vulgar.

Amidst our excitement we were approached by a group of men from the nearby village. They had been watching us and were evidently wondering what we were doing. It seemed obvious to invite them to look through the telescope and after their first hesitant attempts a new wave of collective excitement ensued

beneath the fig-trees (Fig 1). The turaco was soon pointed out in our field-guide and a vivid discussion followed about birds in the area — page after page being checked, well known species being pointed out, calls imitated and heads shaken at the unfamiliar species. As is so often the case, these rural people easily recognised the local birds, and they were thrilled at seeing pictures of 'their' birds. With our driver as interpreter from English to Amharic and a young man from the group from Amharic to the local language we started to ask specific questions about the turaco.

The men were obviously familiar with the bird, and knew it as a permanent resident. The turaco was not on the 'other side' of the village (which is more open dry woodland), and they specified it was mainly found in 'trees with many leaves' (like the fig-trees and in contrast to the dominant *Acacia* woodland in the neighbourhood) and near to water (ie the river). They stated that the species's breeding season coincided with the date of our visit and the period December to February. (However their seeming precision on this point may have been more a consequence of our driver's interpretations.)

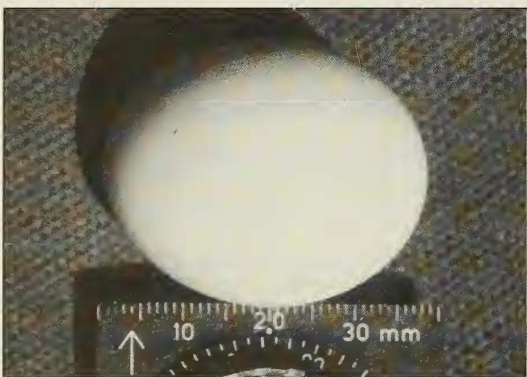
When discussing the breeding season it was mentioned that a man in the village had an egg of the bird! A messenger was sent and half an hour later the person arrived and suddenly we were holding what may well be the first egg of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco ever known to science (Fig 2). A round egg with the size 32.5mm x 38 mm. Colour was dull white with a very slight bluish tinge.

The exact location of the nest site is unknown, but the egg had been taken from a nest 'on a branch' the day before in a 'mountain area' two hours walk away (probably equal to 10–14 km) in an easterly direction from the Genale site. It was not possible to have the area better defined, but the description as a mountain area indicates a higher altitude than the Genale site.

The shape and size of the egg correspond well to eggs of other turacos^{2,3}. Eggs of turacos are still only



Prince Ruspoli's Turaco, 5km NW of Waddera, Sidamo Province, Ethiopia, 1996. (Alan Greensmith)



Probable egg of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii* collected on 28 January 1996 by a local man on an unknown site north of Negele, Sidamo Province, Ethiopia. (Kaj Halberg)

poorly known and with only one specimen available it is not appropriate to expand the comparison beyond this general statement (M.P. Walters in litt).

The best evidence to indicate that this egg had actually been taken from a nest of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco is the obvious local expertise and knowledge. The possibility of having been shown an egg from another species is of course theoretically possible, but based on the spontaneous development of our local contact this seems highly unlikely. A check of available information² reveals few alternatives. Most likely is the White-cheeked Turaco *T. leucotis*. However, this near endemic species to Ethiopia is not known in the areas north of Negele, although it does occur sympatrically with Prince Ruspoli's Turaco at Wadera only 22 km west of the Genale site¹ (ie 30+ km west of the likely nest site). Another candidate could be the White-bellied Go-away Bird *Corythaixoides leucogaster*, which is common in southern Ethiopia and at the Genale site. Finally there are other birds with basically white eggs (doves,

parrots, hornbills, owls, bee-eaters, hoopoes, rollers and woodpeckers), but most of these species normally have eggs of different shapes, either smaller or larger in size. Moreover some of these species nest in holes.

Prince Ruspoli's Turaco is currently known from a few forest areas north and west of Negele and at Arero, where the species is reported from altitudes between 1275 and 1800 m^{1,4}. Our record from the Genale site is from a lower altitude. The bird was silent during the observation and throughout the morning we did not hear any turaco-like calls in the area.

On the question of how many eggs of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco the man had collected, there was a laugh: 'Turaco eggs are very difficult to find and you have to be lucky — it is not something you just collect'. However, the turaco egg was believed to have medicinal value, and the man had collected the egg because someone else had asked for it. Unfortunately he could not describe exactly for what medicinal purpose the egg was used (probably a translation difficulty).

Owing to the obvious local interest in the egg we instantly decided not to try to obtain it — one market must be enough — and neither were we holding any formal Ethiopian permit for the collection of scientific material.

On the contrary, throughout our very friendly talks with the locals we explained that the turaco was 'their' bird of which they should be proud — and the more turacos the better.

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Mollegade 21, 1.tv, DK-2200 Copenhagen N, Denmark